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ABSTRACT

The teaching of film script writing--either as an end in itself or as a means of sharpening the student's visual and narrative awareness--can intensify the student's responsiveness to literature and increase his sense of continuity and consistency of point of view when writing compositions. When developing a silent screen script, students should first choose a subject, then plot out the incident shot by shot, including all essential details and remembering three necessary rules of camera movement, and finally write the script, following specific guidelines. After mastering the silent script, students can proceed to composing a sound script, adapting a familiar narrative poem or a short story. (Included are a glossary of film terms, a silent film script titled "Bus Stop," and drawings depicting scenes for camera shots.) (JM)

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ON WRITING A FILM SCRIPT

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ON WRITING A FILM SCRIPT

An English teacher with even a minimal knowledge of cinematic principles can introduce film script writing either as an end in itself or as a way of sharpening the visual and narrative awareness of students in literature or composition classes. Below I offer a model script for a five-minute silent documentary film, together with objectives and methodology for assigning such a script to one's classes.

In our media-conscious world one need scarcely justify the teaching of the film script as an end in itself; the marvel is that it is not almost universally included in composition courses. But short of that aim, it can have the very practical secondary value of giving students a creative, concrete, and presumably pleasurable means of visualizing (either literally or imaginatively) and recording a brief narrative incident. The experience is almost certain to intensify the students' responsiveness to literature by making them more alert to details. It should also increase their sense of continuity and consistency of point of view in their compositions of whatever sort. After a little experience with the assignment a teacher should readily perceive these and probably other benefits and possibilities; therefore, I shall not belabor the point.

How, then, does one proceed? First, of course, by choosing a subject. Ideally this should be a single dramatic incident--involving a limited number of characters in an uncomplicated setting--which can be conveyed solely by visual images. I would suggest giving students a week at least to discover their subjects. (The one in my model is recorded precisely as I saw it happen during the New York Film Festival last fall.)

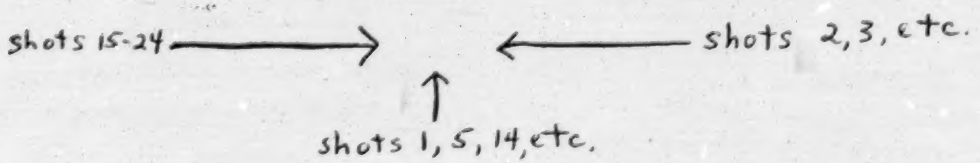
Next, they should plot out the incident shot by shot, so that all essential details are included, imagining their eyes as the eye of the camera. The easiest way to do this is to sketch each shot on a 3x5 card, ruled off to simulate screen size of 3x4, and utilizing simplified stick figures and geometric shapes. Artistic skill is irrelevant but a strong visual awareness is essential. Each sketch indicates the subject of the shot as well as the relationship between the subject and the camera, whether close, medium, or long shot, whether high or low angle or at eye level. Arrows may be added to indicate the direction of camera movement if it is ambiguous; an area toward which the camera zooms in (as in my model, shot 1) may be blocked off. These sketches in their final form will be numbered to coincide with the description of shots in the script and are known as the storyboard.

For the beginner I believe that only three rules of camera movement are necessary:

1. The closer the camera moves toward the subject, the greater will be the impact of the subject (and vice versa). This forward (or backward) movement is accomplished either by zooming the camera in and out within a single shot or by mounting a series of shots from long to medium to close. (The latter method is basic to the classic editing technique known as "montage.")

2. The camera always moves for a purpose: to draw attention to the subject or to follow an action. Besides moving toward or away from the subject, it can rotate from side to side (pan) as well as up and down (tilt).

3. The camera must never cross an imaginary 180° line during a scene. For example, in my model script the camera position from shots 1 through 24 is either straight ahead down 65th Street, 90° to the right of this point looking toward the bus stop from the street, or 90° to the left of this point looking from the bus stop to the street:



With these rules and their preliminary sketches (the outline, so to speak), the students are now ready

to write their scripts. Although the format is quite rigid, it is also relatively simple. Again, only a minimal number of guidelines need be specified:

1. The shots are always numbered in sequence. Each shot is identified as a long, medium, or close shot, followed by the subject of the shot (as a transitive verb must always be followed by its object). Then comes the visual description of the shot, as detailed as one wishes. Any movement of the camera or unusual angles or lighting may be included.

2. Customarily a scene will begin with a fade-in and end with a fade-out; this, too, is indicated, as is a dissolve between shots if a slower transition is preferred. If no such directions are given, one always assumes the abrupt transition of a cut between shots. (Note that the duration of a shot is never indicated. That decision is made by the editor, not the script writer.)

3. One other designation needed is the setting, as follows: Exterior (or Interior) - Place - Day (or Night, or whatever). All three parts must be given, in that order, and need not be repeated until there is a change.

4. Spacing, capitalization, underlining, and the use of hyphens and parentheses are precisely as indicated in my model. For more information see Practical

Manual of Screen Playwriting by Lewis Herman (World Pub.)

With mastery of the silent script, students can next write a sound script, such as the adaptation of a familiar narrative poem or a short story. But my model and methodology for that assignment must remain for a subsequent article.

GLOSSARY

(From Understanding Movies by Louis Giannetti, 1972 ed., Prentice-Hall.)

Close shot. A detailed view of a person or object, usually without much context provided. A close-up of an actor generally includes only his head.

Cut. An abrupt break between shots.

Dissolve. The slow fading out of one shot and the gradual fading in of its successor, with a superimposition of images, usually at the midpoint.

Fade-in. The slow brightening of the picture from a black screen to normal brightness.

Fade-out. The slow fade of the picture from normal brightness to a black screen.

High-angle shot. A shot in which the subject is photographed from above.

Long shot. The amount of picture within the frame that roughly corresponds to the audience's view of the area within the proscenium arch of the legitimate theatre. A long shot of an actor

generally includes his entire body.

Low-angle shot. A shot in which the subject is photographed from below.

Medium shot. A relatively close shot, revealing a considerable amount of detail. A medium shot of an actor generally includes the body from the knees or waist up.

Pan. Short for "panorama." The horizontal movement of the camera from left to right or right to left around a vertical axis.

Scene. A unit of film composed of a number of interrelated shots, unified usually by a central concern--a location, an incident, or a minor dramatic climax.

Shot. An image which is recorded continuously from the time the camera starts until the time it stops.

Tilt. The vertical movement of the camera from an axis.

Zoom. A shot taken with the aid of a zoom lens which gives the effect of the camera traveling closer to or farther away from its subject.

[Note: I have enclosed only a xerox of my storyboard, which consists of separate 3x5 cards. I will, of course, submit these for publication upon request.]

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BUS STOP

A SILENT FILM SCRIPT

FADE IN.

Ext. - Lincoln Center, New York City - Night.

1. EXTREME LONG SHOT - BUILDINGS, STREETS, CROWDS from high angle. Late in the evening. Crowds pour from Fisher Hall and Tully Hall, scattering in all directions. In the foreground is Broadway: between the halls is 65th St. Both streets are jammed with traffic. Bustle and commotion everywhere. CAMERA SLOWLY ZOOMS IN ON CROWDS. One group moves right from Fisher Hall, one moves left from Tully Hall. They converge at the intersection of 65th and Broadway to become a static mass amidst the surrounding activity. CAMERA SLOWLY ZOOMS IN on them.

2. LONG SHOT - STREET CORNER, CROWD. They stand together waiting for the bus to come down 65th St. Bus stop sign is on the left. In the foreground a steady stream of cars and taxis passes, stopping to wait for a light, moving on. On the right are fringes of the masses still streaming by.

3. MEDIUM SHOT - CROWD. CAMERA SLOWLY PANS LEFT over faces of the crowd showing a great diversity of human types and the separateness of each person. No one speaks to or pays any particular attention to anyone else except for a possible disinterested glance. No interaction whatsoever. Their only communion is their immediate goal: to catch a bus. Their near stasis, however, is punctuated with restless small movements: tugging at coat collars, glancing down at watches, looking back and forth toward the right in search of the bus, fingering tokens or coins. The last two faces which the camera picks up are those of a white woman and a black woman.

4. MEDIUM SHOT - WHITE WOMAN, BLACK WOMAN. Both are elderly, poorly dressed, downtrodden types. The white woman has a tired face which looks defeated by life and afraid of life. Her white hair is in wisps about her face, her cheap black hat is askew. Her weary eyes stare straight ahead, seeing nothing. The black woman mutters angrily to herself. Her face expresses violent, aggressive emotion in contrast to the passivity of the white woman's face. First one woman and then the other turns her head right to look for the bus, but they do not look at each other.

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5. LONG SHOT - STREET. A block or more of 65th St. with a solid stream of cars and taxis but no bus.

6. MEDIUM SHOT - PART OF THE CROWD INCLUDING THE WHITE WOMAN AND THE BLACK WOMAN, who now stand out among the others. As before, each person is in his own world, standing alone, not interacting. There is a continuation of the same restless movements as before.

7. CLOSE SHOT - WHITE WOMAN still staring vacantly ahead.

8. CLOSE SHOT - BLACK WOMAN still angry. She is jerking her head as she mutters to herself. She looks once again to the right.

9. LONG SHOT - STREET. At the end of the line of traffic a bus is just coming into sight. CAMERA SLOWLY PANS LEFT FOLLOWING BUS as it advances.

10. LONG SHOT - CROWD. By now they have become alert. Every one is turning toward the right in anticipation of boarding the bus. At the beginning this movement is slow and rather casual. Then it becomes more purposeful, deliberate, and hurried.

11. LONG SHOT - STREET. The bus is half-way between the point where it appeared and where the crowd stand. CAMERA FOLLOWS BUS as it inches its way closer through the line of traffic.

12. MEDIUM SHOT - CROWD. A change is obvious. They are now quite aware of one another. They have become a tight clump, jammed close together and straining forward as a mass. Some are shoving and others are carried along in the press of bodies.

13. MEDIUM SHOT - WHITE WOMAN, BLACK WOMAN, OTHERS in profile. The black woman is directly behind the white woman; others are massed around them. All are intent upon being first to board. Their faces are anxious, tense, including even the white woman's. The black woman's hands are on the white woman's shoulders urging her on. While this is happening, the front of the bus edges into the frame and stops on the right.

14. LONG SHOT - FRONT OF BUS, CROWD. The bus stands at the curb. The crowd are bunched tightly against the left side of the bus. The driver looks left as the first passenger enters and deposits a fare in the fare box.

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15. LONG SHOT - BUS DOOR, CROWD from behind. They jam around the open door, competing frantically to board, Others are already on their way up the steps in the doorway. The white woman, with the black woman's hands still on her shoulders, is apparent at the edge of the crowd.

16. MEDIUM SHOT - BUS DOOR, WHITE WOMAN, BLACK WOMAN, OTHERS in partial profile at a high angle. It is the white woman's turn to board. She pauses for a moment, steadying herself with a cane, while the black woman keeps her hands on the white woman's back and yells at her. The white woman seems not to heed but concentrates on the bus step.

17. MEDIUM SHOT - WHITE WOMAN, still from a high angle, as she looks down at the lowest step, grabs for the hand rail on the bus with her left hand, and steadying herself with the cane in her right hand, slowly and awkwardly hoists herself onto the first step. Suddenly from the right, the black woman's hands reappear.

18. MEDIUM SHOT - WHITE WOMAN, BLACK WOMAN from a high angle. The black woman, with extreme hostility on her face, gives the white woman a terrific shove from behind. The white woman falls forward onto the second step of the bus. Her cane falls from her hand. From her fallen position she looks around in terror to see who has pushed her. The black woman draws back.

19. MEDIUM SHOT - CROWD outside of bus surging around the two women and surrounding the bus door. Anger, shouts of condemnation, as all faces turn toward the black woman.

20. MEDIUM SHOT - BLACK WOMAN, MAN standing nearest her. He looks left, cursing the black woman.

21. CLOSE SHOT - BLACK WOMAN looking right, shouting back at the man.

22. MEDIUM SHOT - WHITE WOMAN, BLACK WOMAN, MAN, OTHERS. In the foreground are the same faces, mouthing a few more curses, then turning to face the white woman. She slowly pulls herself to her feet, retrieves her cane, and climbs the rest of the steps.

23. MEDIUM SHOT - WHITE WOMAN, BLACK WOMAN. The white woman reaches the fare box, deposits her fare, then turns around to face the black woman, who now stands rather meekly on the lowest step. CAMERA ZOOMS IN ON WHITE WOMAN'S FACE which gathers wrath like a great storm, erupting in a single violent curse.

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24. LONG SHOT - BUS, CROWD, WHITE WOMAN, BLACK WOMAN. The white woman has now turned left and is going toward the interior of the bus. The black woman slowly mounts the steps toward the fare box. The rest of the crowd are working their way toward the bus door. It is very noticeable that all the previous hurry and tension have subsided. Movements are slow and controlled. Finally the last person boards and the bus door closes.

DISSOLVE TO:

Int. - Bus - Night.

25. LONG SHOT - CROWD inside the bus. On the left the white woman sits. On the right the black woman sits. Both are almost obliterated by the crowd, some sitting, others standing in the aisles, hanging on to the overhead poles.

26. CLOSE SHOT - WHITE WOMAN. She is once more looking stupefied. But the horror of her recent experience is still on her face. She makes one long stare at an angle toward the black woman, then drops her head.

27. CLOSE SHOT - BLACK WOMAN. She is looking rather subdued but still mutters to herself. She also hangs her head slightly.

28. LONG SHOT - CROWD. As before, people sit, stand all around the two women. And as at the very beginning of their gathering at the corner, no one is paying attention any longer to anyone alse. The two women are ignored. It is just as if nothing at all had happened. The bus begins to move and people sway in their seats or lurch in the aisles, away from the camera.

Ext. - Bus, Street - Night.

29. LONG SHOT - STREET, BUS from behind, loaded with people, moves down the street, away from the camera, and disappears into the night.

FADE OUT.

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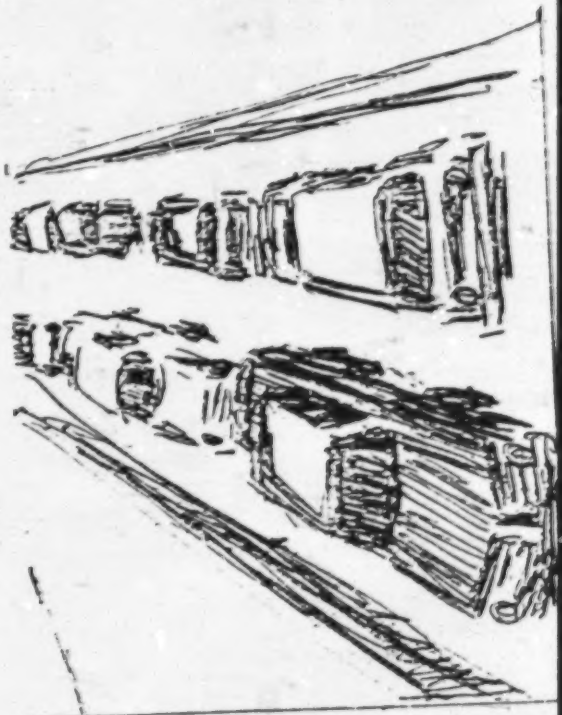

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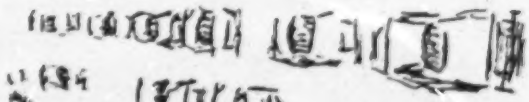

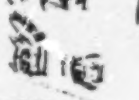

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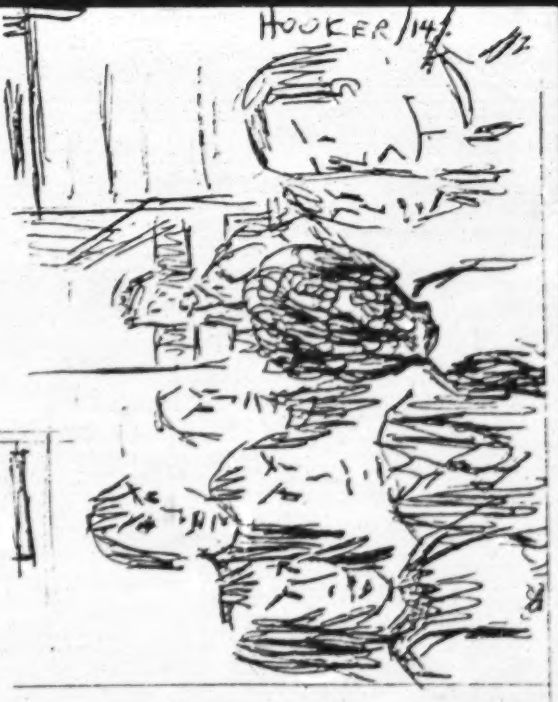

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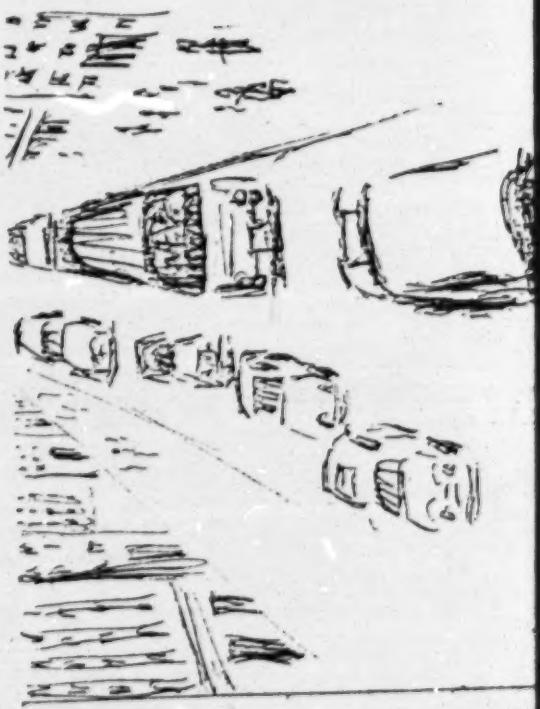

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